Measurement of electron-hole friction in an n-doped GaAs/AlGaAs quantum well using optical transient grating spectroscopy

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Abstract

We use phase-resolved transient grating spectroscopy to measure the drift and diffusion of electron-hole density waves in a semiconductor quantum well. The unique aspects of this optical probe allow us to determine the frictional force between a two-dimensional Fermi liquid of electrons and a dilute gas of holes. Knowledge of electron-hole friction enables prediction of ambipolar dynamics in high-mobility electron systems.

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The motion of electrons and holes is crucial to the operation of virtually all semiconductor devices and is a central topic of the classic semiconductor texts [1, 2]. In particular, the coupled motion of electron-hole (e-h) packets in applied electric fields, known as ambipolar transport, is discussed in depth. However, it has been known for some time, although not perhaps widely appreciated, that the motion of e-h packets in the high-mobility electron gases found in semiconductor quantum wells and heterojunctions violates the predictions of the standard theory. Insufficient understanding of ambipolar dynamics poses a problem for the development of a spin-based electronics, as many prospective devices are based on spin currents carried by spin polarized e-h packets subjected to electric fields [3–5].

In the standard textbook description of ambipolar transport in a doped semiconductor, electrons and holes interact only through the long-range Coulomb interaction. Momentum relaxation occurs by scattering on impurities and phonons and there is no exchange of momentum between electrons and holes. On the basis of these assumptions it is predicted that in an n-type semiconductor, for example, an e-h packet drifts in the direction of the force on the holes, opposite to the motion of the Fermi sea of electrons. However, by photoluminescence imaging, Höpfel *et al.* discovered that in GaAs quantum wells a drifting e-h packet moves in the direction of the majority, rather than minority carrier, an effect they termed "negative ambipolar mobility" [6]. They recognized that this effect originates from the scattering between electrons and holes, neglected in the standard versions of ambipolar transport.

The scattering that dominates ambipolar transport in a single quantum well is precisely analogous to the Coulomb drag effect that has been studied intensively in systems in which layers of electron gases are in close proximity [7–9]. In such systems, the strength of the Coulomb interaction between layers can be determined with precision via the transresistance, which is the ratio of the voltage induced in one layer to a current in the other. The transresistance is a direct measure of the rate of momentum exchange (or frictional force) between the two coupled electronic systems. Unfortunately, this technique cannot be used to probe the much stronger frictional force between electrons and holes in the same layer, which plays a crucial role in ambipolar dynamics.

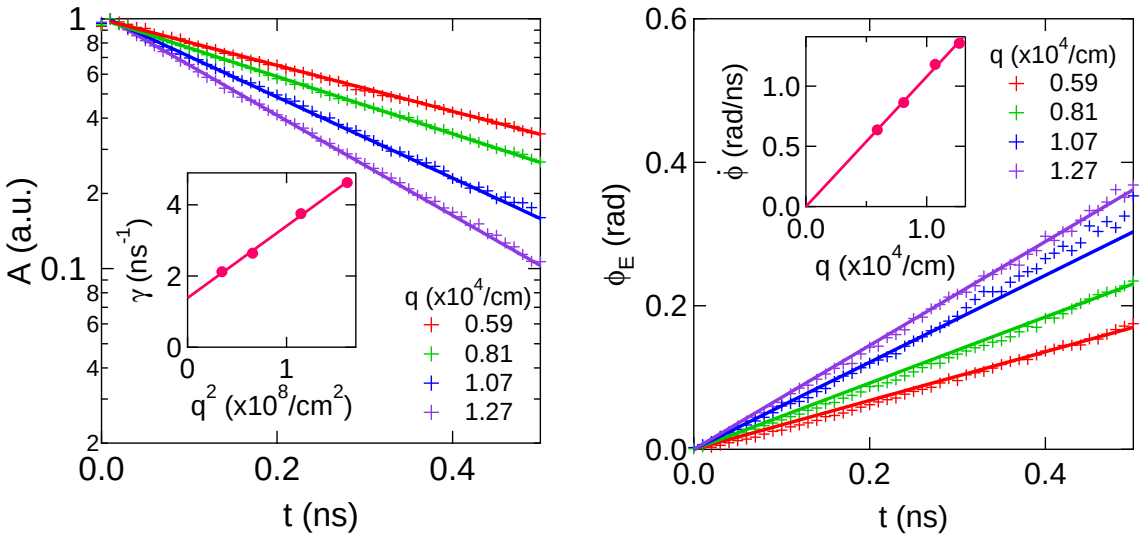
In the experiments reported here we perform the first complete characterization of coupled e-h transport in a two-dimensional electron gas (2DEG) by measuring simultaneously

the ambipolar diffusion coefficient D_a and the ambipolar mobility μ_a. From these measured coefficients, and a simple model of momentum exchange between the Fermi sea and the packet, we obtain the effective drag resistance ρ_{eh} between electrons and holes in a single quantum well. We show that the value of ρ_{eh} for a single layer, although orders of magnitude larger the transresistance of bilayers, can be quantitatively understood using the same random-phase approximation (RPA) model that describes coupled quantum wells. Based on these findings, it becomes possible to predict the ambipolar transport coefficients for high-mobility semiconductors as a function of carrier density and temperature.

Our measurements of *e-h* transport are performed using transient grating spectroscopy (TGS) [10], which is a contact-free technique based on time-resolved optics. In TGS standing waves of either *e-h* or spin density [11] are created in a 2DEG by photoexcitation with two noncollinear beams of light from a pulsed (100 fs) laser. When the pulses are polarized in the same direction, interference generates a standing wave of laser intensity, creating a sinusoidal pattern of *e-h* density whose spatial period depends on the angle between the interfering beams. The *e-h* density wave imprinted in the 2DEG induces local variation in the index of refraction, and therefore acts as an optical diffraction grating. The time evolution of the density waves after pulsed photogeneration can be monitored via the diffraction of a time-delayed probe pulse.

The ambipolar diffusion coefficient can be readily determined by measuring the rate at which the grating amplitude decays as a function of its wavelength. However, as we discuss below, characterization of ρ_{eh} requires that μ_a must also be measured under the same experimental conditions. The latter is the coefficient that relates the drift velocity of the *e-h* density wave to the magnitude of an electric field E applied in the plane of the 2DEG. Measurement of μ_a clearly requires sensitivity to the position of the *e-h* density wave - information that is contained in the *phase shift* of the diffracted light. On the other hand, conventional scattering experiments measure light intensity, and thus phase information is lost. In the experiments reported here, we demonstrate that time-resolved detection of both *amplitude and phase* of light diffracted from a drifting *e-h* density wave allows simultaneous determination μ_a and D_a, which together yield the transresistance of the coupled *e-h* system.

The measurements were performed on a 9 nm wide n-doped GaAs/AlGaAs quantum well, grown by molecular beam epitaxy on a semi-insulating GaAs (001) substrate (VB0355).



(a) (b)

FIG. 1: (Color online) (a) Relative amplitude of e-h density wave as function of time for several values of the wave vector q measured at 50 K. Inset: The decay rate γ of the amplitude, plotted as a function of q^2; the slope of the solid line through the data points is the ambipolar diffusion coefficient D_a, and the intercept is the inverse of the e-h recombination time τ_{rec}. (b) Linear advance of the phase of the e-h density wave with time for several values of q, at 50 K. The applied electric field is $E \approx 2$V/cm. Inset: The rate of phase change $\dot{\phi}$ as a function of q.

The carrier density and mobility of the 2DEG are $1.9 \times 10^{11}/\mathrm{cm}^2$ and $5.5 \times 10^5 \mathrm{cm}^2/\mathrm{Vs}$ at 5 K, respectively. The silicon donors were symmetrically doped in the center of each barrier. The 2DEG channel was defined by a mesa etching, and Ohmic contact was made by annealing NiGeAu to the sample. After patterning the GaAs substrate was mechanically lapped and chemically etched to allow for optical measurement in transmission geometry. Several samples were prepared with semitransparent front and back gate electrodes to allow for continuous variation of the equilibrium electron density.

The electron-hole density grating was generated by focusing the two pump beams onto a 150 μm diameter spot between the two Ohmic contacts, which are separated by 200 μm. Phase-sensitive detection of the light diffracted from the grating was performed using a heterodyne technique [12–17], in which scattered pulses are mixed in a Si photodiode with a beam of transmitted pulses acting as a local oscillator (LO). The output voltage of the Si detector contains a phase-sensitive term, proportional to $A(q,t)\exp[i(\phi_{pld} + \phi_E)]$, where

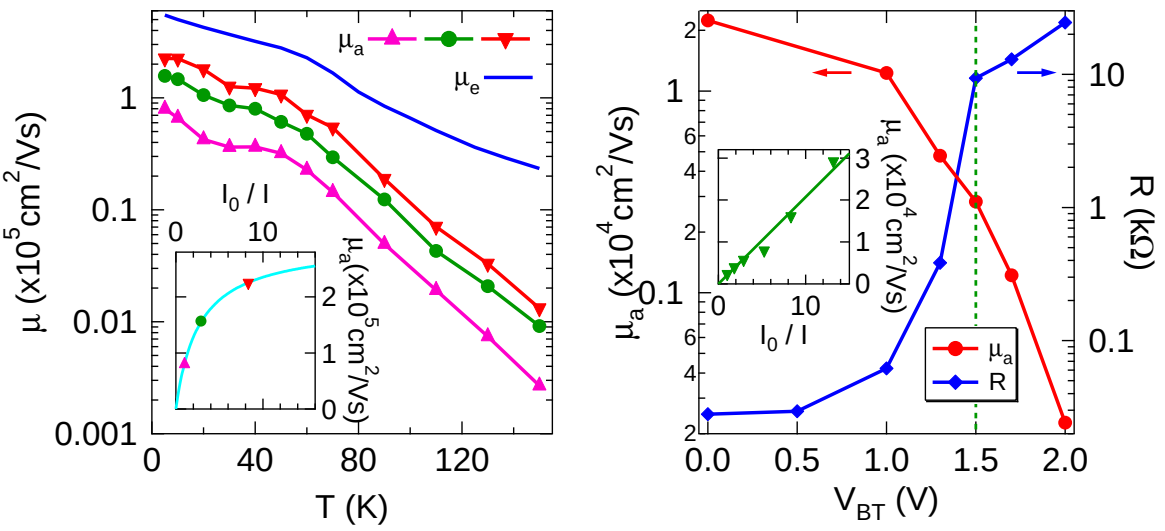
$A(q,t)$ is the amplitude of the density wave, $\phi_{pld} = kd$ reflects the path length difference d between the LO and diffracted beams (k is the wave vector of the light), and $\phi_E = \boldsymbol{q} \cdot \delta\boldsymbol{r}$, where $\boldsymbol{q}$ and $\delta\boldsymbol{r}$ are the grating wave vector and position, respectively. For uniform motion with velocity $\boldsymbol{v}$ parallel to $\boldsymbol{q}$, $\phi_E = qvt$. The linear advance of phase with time is equivalent to a Doppler shift of frequency, $\Delta\omega = qv$. The phase noise level of 0.01 rad in our detection system corresponds to an uncertainty in velocity of $\sim$ 10 m/s, which is approximately 4 orders of magnitude smaller than the Fermi velocity v_F.

To measure $A(q,t)$ and $\phi_E(q,t)$ separately, we combine heterodyne detection with two phase-modulation schemes. To obtain $A(q,t)$ we modulate ϕ_{pld} by oscillating the angle of a coverslip placed in the LO beam path. For weak phase modulation the synchronously detected heterodyne signal is proportional to $A(q,t)\Delta\phi_{pld}$. To obtain $\phi_E(q,t)$ we oscillate the in-plane E field (applied parallel to $\boldsymbol{q}$) that induces drift and measure the synchronous signal $A(q,t)v(E)qt$. From these two measurements we extract $A(q,t)$ and $qv(E)t$ independently.

In Fig. 1(a) we show the grating amplitude at a representative temperature of 50 K as a function of time after photogeneration, plotted on semilog axes, for several values of the grating wave vector. The decay of $A(q,t)$ is a single exponential with a rate constant, γ, that increases with increasing wave vector. As shown in the inset, γ varies with q as expected for the combined effects of diffusion and electron-hole recombination, $\gamma(q) = 1/\tau_{rec} + D_a q^2$, where τ_{rec} is the electron-hole recombination time.

In Fig. 1(b) we plot the phase of the *e-h* density wave, $\phi_E(q,t)$ versus t for different values of q at 50 K at full laser intensity $I_0 \simeq 0.25\mu$J-cm^{-2} per pulse. The linear dependence of $\phi_E(q,t)$ on both t and q (see inset) is consistent with the Doppler shift $\phi_E(q,t) = v(E)qt$. The sign of the phase shift gives the direction of motion under the influence of the electric field, which we determine to be the same as that of the electron Fermi sea. From $\partial\phi_E(q,t)/\partial q$ at fixed time delay we obtain the drift velocity of the *e-h* density wave. Normalizing by the applied electric field yields the ambipolar mobility μ_a.

In the course of the measurements we discovered that μ_a depends strongly on I, in addition to the expected dependence on temperature T. Figure 2(a) shows μ_a determined using the analysis outlined above as a function of T, for three different values I. For comparison, we also plot the electron mobility μ_e, as determined from standard four-contact dc transport measurement. As is clear from Fig. 2(a), μ_a decreases when either T or I increases.



(a) (b)

FIG. 2: (Color online) (a) Ambipolar mobility μ_a at three different pump intensities compared with electron mobility μ_e, as a function of T. Inset: μ_a as a function of laser intensity at 5 K, the solid line is a fit (see text). (b) Ambipolar mobility μ_a and sample resistance R as a function of gate voltage V_{BT} at 50 K. Inset: μ_a as a function of laser intensity at fixed gate bias V_{BT}=1.5V at 50 K; solid line is a linear fit showing that $\mu_a \propto 1/I$.

When nonequilibrium laser experiments show such dependencies, there can be ambiguity as to whether the dependence on I reflects an intrinsic dependence on the photogenerated carrier density, Δn, or the effect of transient local heating of the electron gas. To determine whether the I dependence is intrinsic, we performed TGS measurements on a device with semitransparent gate electrodes, which allowed us to vary the equilibrium electron density n_0 at fixed Δn.

In Fig. 2(b) we plot μ_a and the 2DEG resistance R at 50 K, as a function of the voltage between the two gates, V_{BT}. Clearly μ_a decreases rapidly as n_0 is driven to zero (and $R \to \infty$) by increasingly positive V_{BT}. As these measurements are performed at constant I, it is evident that the intensity dependence shown in Fig. 2(a) reflects an intrinsic dependence of μ_a on the ratio $\Delta n/n_0$, rather than laser-induced heating. The inset of Fig. 2(b) illustrates that μ_a scales as $1/I$ (equivalent to $1/\Delta n$) in the regime where n_0 is small, while the Fig. 2(a) inset shows that μ_a approaches an asymptotic value μ_{a0} in the limit that I (and Δn) $\to 0$. The overall dependence of variation of μ_a can be summarized by the simple formula

$$\mu_a(I) = \frac{\mu_{a0}}{1 + \alpha(\Delta n/n_0)}, \tag{1}$$

where α is a T-dependent parameter.

At this point, we can summarize our experimental findings as follows: (1) The photogenerated e-h packet drifts under the influence of an E field in the same direction as the Fermi sea of electrons, (2) the velocity of the packet goes to zero as $\Delta n/n_0 \to \infty$ and approaches a constant in the limit that $\Delta n/n_0 \to 0$, (3) the asymptotic value, $\mu_{a0}(T)$ [Fig. 3(a)], is proportional to, but slightly smaller than, the electron mobility for $T < 80$ K, but becomes much smaller than μ_e for $T > 80$ K. We show below that each of these observations can be understood with a relatively simple model that treats the e-h packet as a neutral gas of particles that can exchange momentum with the Fermi sea.

The stationary transport equations for free electrons and the packet can be written as

$$\frac{n_0 m_e v_e}{\tau_e} + n_0 \Delta n \gamma (v_e - v_p) = -n_0 e E,$$
$$\frac{\Delta n m_p v_p}{\tau_p} + n_0 \Delta n \gamma (v_p - v_e) + k_B T \nabla(\Delta n) = 0,$$

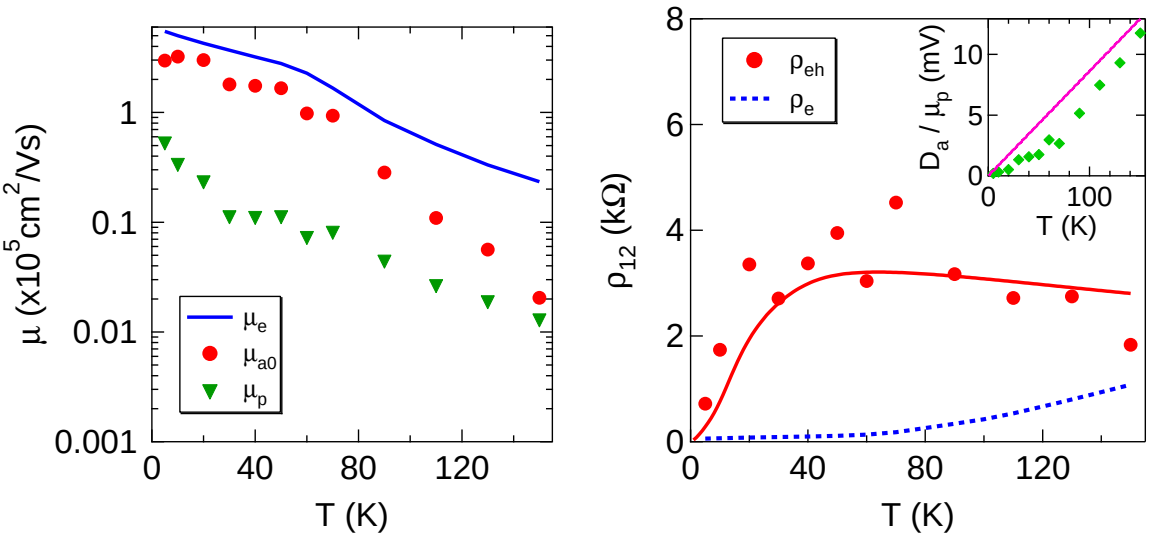
where $1/\tau_{e(p)}$ is the rate at which electrons(packet) lose momentum to the lattice, m_e and m_p are respective masses, and γ is a parameter describing the rate of momentum exchange. By solving these equations we obtain precisely the form of Eq. 1, where

$$\mu_{a0} = -\frac{\mu_e}{1 + \frac{\mu_e}{\mu_p}\frac{\rho_e}{\rho_{eh}}}, \tag{2}$$

and $\alpha = \mu_{a0}/\mu_p$. In Eq. 2 we have made use of the definitions, $\mu_p \equiv e\tau_p/m_p$, $\rho_e \equiv (n_0 e \mu_e)^{-1}$, and $\gamma \equiv e^2 \rho_{eh}$. The negative sign of μ_a corresponds to the e-h packet drifting in the same direction as the Fermi sea of electrons. In addition, we find that solving for the ambipolar diffusion coefficient yields

$$D_a = \frac{k_B T \mu_{a0}}{e}\frac{\rho_e}{\rho_{eh}}. \tag{3}$$

From Eq. 3 we see that independent measurement of μ_{a0}, D_a, and ρ_e directly yields the electron-hole transresistance, ρ_{eh}. The values of ρ_{eh} thus determined are plotted versus T in Fig. 3(b), together with ρ_e for comparison. We see that in the low T regime, $\rho_e \ll \rho_{eh}$, which translates to an ambipolar mobility that is not too different from the electron mobility. As T increases and ρ_e approaches ρ_{eh}, μ_{a0} tends towards the much smaller μ_p. While the values



(a) (b)

FIG. 3: (Color online) (a) Comparison of electron mobility μ_e; ambipolar mobility μ_{a0}, and packet mobility μ_p, as a function of T. (b) The e-h drag transresistivity ρ_{eh} as a function of T; solid line is a theoretical prediction of ρ_{eh} based on the RPA. Inset: D_a/μ_p compared with the Einstein relation prediction in the non-degenerate regime k_BT/e.

of ambipolar mobility are controlled by ρ_e/ρ_{eh}, D_a itself is fairly insensitive to Coulomb drag because diffusive spreading of the packet takes place with parallel transport of electrons and holes. This effect is illustrated in the inset of Fig. 3(b), which compares the ratio D_a/μ_p to k_BT/e. The near agreement with the Einstein relation shows that D_a is essentially determined by the nondegenerate gas of holes because the electrons in the packet are tethered to them through the long-range Coulomb interaction.

The values of $\rho_{eh}(T)$ that we obtain are several orders of magnitude larger than those obtained in Coulomb drag experiments on coupled quantum wells [18, 19]. However, in the experiments reported here (i) electrons and holes are confined to the same quantum well and (ii) one of the Fermi gases (the holes) is nondegenerate throughout the T range of the experiment. To test whether the values of $\rho_{eh}(T)$ shown in Fig. 3(b) are reasonable, we apply the standard RPA model for Coulomb drag to the single layer case. The RPA expression for $\rho_{eh}(T)$ is the phase space integral of the product of the interaction, $V_{\rm RPA}(q)$, and $\mathrm{Im}\{\chi_{1,2}\}$, the imaginary part of the susceptibility of fermion species 1 and 2, respectively [20–22]. To apply this theory to our experiment, we substitute the nondegenerate Lindhard response for

the hole susceptibility [23]. Numerical evaluation of the phase space integral, plotted as a solid line in Fig. 3(b), shows that the RPA interaction describes the experimental data quite well without any free parameters.

In conclusion, we have used phase-resolved TGS to simultaneously measure the ambipolar drift and diffusion of photoinjected electrons and holes. From these measurements we determine for the first time the frictional force between a degenerate Fermi liquid of electrons and a dilute gas of holes in the same two-dimensional system. The measured values of ρ_{eh} data are accurately described by the static limit of RPA-based theory with no free parameters. By combining ρ_{eh} with a simple model based on conservation of momentum, the ambipolar dynamics of high-mobility electron gases can be predicted, enabling more powerful modeling of devices, for example those based on spin current of drifting polarized carriers.

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